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Jerry Eubanks

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ANTICIPATIONS, PARTICIPATIONS AND EFFECTS OF A
WORLD'S FAIR ON A NEARBY NATIONAL PARK

BY

JERRY EUBANKS, SUPERINTENDENT

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK
GATLINBURG, TENNESSEE 37738

ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of the World's Fair upon the park system. It details the planning process utilized to accommodate the increased use.

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INTRODUCTION

There are some 334 units of the park system, including 48 national parks. The Great Smoky Mountains is the most heavily visited national park in the system. We get between eight and nine million visits a year. My remarks today will cover some of the concerns we had about the World's Fair, the preparations we made and the actual effects experienced.

PLANNING

First and foremost in our minds was how we were going to meet the additional demands created by the Fair. We thought there would probably be an additional 25 percent increase in visitation which would put us up to around eleven million. Also, we were very concerned about how to handle tour buses. We were not well equipped to handle bus traffic in the park. We had some concerns about communicating with foreign visitors. Very few of us speak any foreign languages. We were concerned about visitor safety and traffic congestion. We were also concerned about larceny and similar crimes in the park. Crimes in the park are not significant, but we do have a number of what we call "car cloutings." That is when professional people break into cars to get at the contents. We were concerned about the security of dignitaries. We have our share of them each year regardless of the World's Fair, and were expecting more of them. We did expect a heavy increase in camping. Camping in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park costs \$6 per site. Most of the camps in the private sector are two or three times that cost.

We did obtain additional funding, but there was a problem in doing that. First, we had to get the attention of the Secretary of the Interior and our Director, and we did get assurance of funding, thank goodness. The next thing we did after we got the money was to increase parking spaces for buses.

We maintained contact constantly with local tour organizations to get a reading on how many buses were being booked for the area and what to expect. We were very much concerned about the non-professional bus driver in the mountains. There were people riding in school buses, church buses and high school band buses with either the band director, choir director or a student driving.

We established a communications bank with people around the area to communicate with foreign visitors. We maintained a high visibility among our uniformed people. We added more people, brought our staff on early, got them trained and fully prepared. We maintained close liaison with the law enforcement organizations involved in the Knoxville area; the World's Fair, the local police departments, and so forth. We constantly monitored the status of our campground occupancy--how many vacant sites we had, how the campers were distributed, and camping demands. We added two kiosks for giving out information. One was at the Sugarlands Information Center and one was at the major intersection near Townsend, Tennessee, to answer people's questions--mainly for those who were there for the first time and did not know where to go or what to do.

IMPLEMENTATION

We really do not know about our visits count. We measure visits by tabulating the number of times a traffic counter is crossed by a vehicle and multiply that by a standard passenger load. Going by that method, the park is up in overall travel by only one percent for that six-month period, but that does not factor in tour buses, which account for a larger than our normal factor or 3.2 persons per vehicle count.

We noticed a big change in the pattern of use. Normally, our highest visitation is on weekends and holidays. This year, we had higher visitation during the week days. Holidays were down. Memorial Day weekend was just dead.

Camping in developed campgrounds, where you can drive through to either tent camp or use R/V equipment, was up 10 percent. That is about all we could handle. We were just about filled to capacity. Camping in the backcountry areas, of which we have a number, only runs to around 80,000 people per year, and it was down about five percent.

The count in our visitor center at Sugarlands was up 16 percent. That does not include the people who did not go into the center. Those visitors got information outside from the kiosk rather than going inside. Oconaluftee Visitor Center was up 24 percent for the six-month period.

Our visitor injuries and fatalities were down considerably over previous years. We think this is due to people driving more carefully than normal and higher visibility among the uniformed people.

Day use (such as picnicking), which is popular in the park, was down 12 percent.

Criminal activities, such as "car clouting" and related incidents, were down approximately 10 percent. We had no problems with security of dignitaries. Most just visited the park with no publicity. Nor did we have any significant difficulties in communicating with foreign visitors.

Tour bus traffic was up considerably. We do not know how much, but we think we had an increase of about 70 buses and motorcoaches per day, which could account for about 700,000 additional people that were not included in the official count. There were no significant bus accidents.

Some general observations that I have made personally--not officially--provide no doubt in my mind that we had a different clientele this summer. The local people who normally come to the park did not come this year. They stayed at home. Based on actual scientific studies in the past, we know that most of the people who are from the local area (within 200 or 300 miles) come two or three times a year. They know the park. They do not need to have questions answered. But this year, the visitors were new. Most of them visited only one time and had many questions. I think from this the park has received higher visitation from a broader demographic and geographic base, and I think this will tend to have a positive influence on visitation in the future. I think next year we will have our normal visitors back plus some of those that have been exposed the first time, or some of the friends and neighbors of the first-timers.

I think bus tours are on the increase. There is no doubt in my mind. Comments from tour bus operators from the northeast and other places that had never been to that area before indicate they plan to book more tours next year.

It has been a good year. It has been a very unusual year. I think the key to it is maintaining flexibility. You have just got to have flexibility when you have changes in visitor patterns. You can not get locked into any one mode of "this is the way it has got to be." You have to be ready to change with the patterns.
